

Short paper for Art & Science – Hybrid Art and Interdisciplinary Research  
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## **Wolf Within**

### ***Should artists conducting academic research wear sheep's clothing?***

In recent years, many universities have opened their doors to artistic research and invited artists to conduct doctoral research. As I combine my art practice with a teaching job at the LUCA School of Arts in Belgium, associated with University of Leuven, I was asked to step into one of these pioneering programs too. With great enthusiasm, because new challenges and possibilities to gain knowledge have always attracted me, I became a part-time doctoral student in 2009. Today, almost one year before my PhD defense, I am looking back at a fascinating but sometimes also troubling adventure. In this short paper I am sharing some of my challenges, in order to inspire reflection on adaptations an artist should or should not endure when conducting academic research. Through the allegorical idiom of a wolf in sheep's clothing I am questioning to which extent artists should adjust to the prevailing academic traditions.

The wolf, as a species, departs from strong intuitive intelligence and is not afraid to experience and expose raw energy. Wolves are capable of maintaining a high amount of individuality within social ties, and always long for freedom. In these characteristics I recognize aspects of my own persona, or at least it reflects how I wish to see myself. In particular the young loner that has left its pack to explore new territories, possibly to form a new pack, feeds my imagination. As an artist I have often felt attracted to fields beyond the ones that are common in art. For example circumpolar cultures, technology and biology have inspired me greatly and influenced my art practice positively<sup>1</sup>. Thus, when our university's doctoral program was introduced to the teachers of my faculty, I was easily excited. My motivation to enter the program was not driven by thoughts of grass being greener elsewhere, but by a wish to explore new fields. These new territories, situated in a world called academia, seemed suitable for some projects that I wished to work on for a couple of years already. Once enrolled, I focused my research on the position of artists working with participatory practices, with two projects as case studies. As an outsider to the communities I am working for and with, I am very interested in how creative practices, often combined with media use, can create a temporary feeling of togetherness. During participatory practices, the act of expression and shared activity can build a metaphorical bridge where people can meet in the middle: in the between. My desire to build bridges and my search for artist' positions, within the structures of doctoral research, brings me back to wolves. Although I am aware of the fact that many people consider wolves to be vicious predators, and even use this allegorical

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the Braintec project ([www.braintec.info](http://www.braintec.info)) or the Food Related project ([www.foodrelated.org](http://www.foodrelated.org)).

image to nickname over-ambitious and egocentric colleagues, I choose wolves to visualize and illustrate some of my experiences as an artist in academia. I realize that this metaphor can sometimes be a bit provocative, but I never aimed to complain, blame or offend. Although comparisons are in general never waterproof, they can get closer to the essence. Just like storytelling, metaphors can reach a truth more creatively or even artistically. Which is, as I believe, more appealing to and for artists.

In my romantic imagination, wolves symbolize independent artists. Consider a highly sensitive creature with a strong urge to follow its instinct. Consider its natural habitat, the wilderness. Wolves can survive in zoos and wild parks, even breed with dogs, but “the heart of the wolf and the heart of wilderness can never be managed” (Busch, 1995). I imagine that the knowledge *of* wolves, not *about* wolves, is wild and hard to manage too, because it derives from intuition. Just like artistic knowledge, in its core, it is not easy to be put into words or schemes. Skills can be taught in practice, by trial and error and by watching others. But the visualizing of either the catch of prey or the creation of an artwork is something else. When Tim Ingold compared artists with hunters, he paralleled their capability of dreaming before encountering. It is all about “capturing the insights of an imagination always inclined to shoot off into the distance, and on bringing them back into the immediacy of material engagement” (Ingold, 2013-73). Also Heonik Kwon underpins the hunting parallel. When endeavoring to turn his students into good hunters, he taught them to “follow the movements of beings and things, and in turn to respond to them with judgement and precision. They would discover that the path to wisdom lay in this correspondence, not in an escape into the self-referential domain of academic texts” (Ingold, 2013-11).

In contrast with the intuitive, dreamlike essence of artistic knowledge, we can consider contemporary western scientific knowledge to be a domesticated kind of knowledge. The academic world breeds its own professors and harvests its own knowledge that grows from them. This knowledge is farmed in a protected environment, in and around the universities of academia. Unlike the wilderness, protected places always come with rules and restrictions. Academic knowledge is therefore very structured and needs to follow certain standards in order to fit in. This often makes it strict and exclusive. Although intuition and dreams can benefit scientists, the act of conducting academic research is usually cognitive and objective. The more we understand academia’s need for borders and regulations, the more revolutionary we can consider the fact that many universities have opened their doors to artistic research. Besides some pressure from the Bologna Declarations, motivation can be found in the value of exchange and interdisciplinarity for generating and extending (new) knowledge. Inclusion of artistic knowledge within the current rules and regulations, however, can be troublesome. The relationship between artistic research and academia is yet uneasy and far from settled (Borgdorf, 2012). This brings me back to wolves, wilderness, and the domesticated.

There once was a time that wolf populations flourished in Western Europe, without forming a real threat to the livestock of farmers. But the approach towards wolves and also their habitat changed during the middle ages, when

human populations were growing and Christianity started to flourish. Since then, the habitat of wolves was considered the anti-pole of the domesticated. From Christianity, the notion of wilderness derived, being a threatening evil opposite of the divine (Pluskowski, 2006). Wilderness was either destroyed, conquered, or –in the best cases – neglected, just like the pagans or heathens. Wolves were portrayed as evil beasts, stigmatizing the species as an allegory for the Devil himself, as we can read in this Medieval Bestiary entry:

*“The wolf represents the Devil because he continuously watches Mankind with an evil eye and circles the sheepfold of faithful Christians, seeking to corrupt and destroy their souls. ... The fact that the wolf’s strength lies in its forequarters rather than hindquarters also signifies the Devil, formerly an angel in heaven, now an apostate in hell. The wolf’s eyes shine in the night like lamps because the Devil’s works seem beautiful and wholesome to blind and foolish men. The she-wolf catches food for her cubs far from her lair because the Devil provides those whom he is certain will suffer punishment in hell with worldly goods. ... The fact that he cannot turn his neck without turning his whole body signifies that the Devil never turns towards correction through penitence.”*

Aberdeen Univ. Lib. MS 24, ff16v-18r

This is how Christianity approached and stigmatized wolves – an image of fear that is nowadays still common. Another image comes from Little Red Riding Hood, a fairy tale in which both the Big Bad Wolf and the wilderness symbolize luring danger. Probably the earliest version was told by French peasants in the 10th century (Berlioz, 2005-63). In some 14th century versions the story ends when the wolf eats the little girl, after she gets into bed with him (Darnton, 1985). The fairy tale may also serve as a metaphor for sexual awakening, as in Angela Carter's version "The Company of Wolves", in which the red hood symbolizes menstruation. In her version of the world-famous story, Carter writes: *“Those slavering jaws, the lolling tongue; the rime of salvia on the grizzled chops – of all the teeming perils of the nights and the forest, ghosts, hobgoblins, ogres that grill babies upon gridirons, witches that fatten their captives in cages for cannibal tales, the wolf is worst for he cannot listen to reason”* (Carter, 1995-110).

Many other European stories formed propaganda against wolves. Competition partly explains this ancient hatred, because a pack of wolves can kill over a hundred sheep in one hour (Micklethwait, 2012). Being hunted and raided intensely, wolves disappeared in Western Europe around 1900 (Mech & Boitani 2003), but today they are on their return. Despite the ancient hatred and negative propaganda, many people cherish the recent comeback. Reintroduction programs of wolves in the United States taught us that wolves have a positive impact on their environment in keeping the populations of prey animals strong while creating conditions for more diversity (Maughan, 2006). But in Western Europe, where wolves are returning naturally, it seems to be another reflection on wolves that forms the surplus. The common attitudes to nature moved from utilitarian to romantic, and as representers of the lost wilderness wolves became the antithesis to civilization (Micklethwait, 2012).

With interest I have been following discussions related to this comeback, with all its pro's and contra's, and to my great amusement I see some similarities in discussions about the option for artists to conduct doctoral research. For example, I once sensed similar fear among a group of academicians. They were worried. If practice based PhD's become a common thing, they argued, their own academic grade will remain less valuable. They obviously feared for their own position, and expressed doubt on the weight of a practice based thesis – which they could hardly take seriously. But also within groups of artists I sensed concern, often also defiance. Their threats contained demolition of the essence of art, which in their opinion is not academic in character. Artists conducting academic research were even considered 'less' artist, or not 'true artists'. In comparison to the comeback of wolves, can we perhaps speak of a comeback of arts towards science, as it was previously more merged, for example before and during the Renaissance? To which extent is the 'wildness' of art then a threat or a romantic surplus to the domesticated world of academia? And to which extent is a merge with science a threat to the 'wildness' of art itself?

Although we can find many similarities between artists and scientists, the kinds of knowledge and practices in which artists are usually engaged, often differ greatly. It are mainly these differences that create challenges. For example, artistic knowledge is not limited to mental and intellectual activities, while academic writing structures lack flexibility for creative expressions. Artistic research, although it is also categorized as research, may include practices or methodologies that are not necessarily academic. Artists obviously have always conducted research, for example in gaining knowledge about their materials, tools, techniques, or subjects. These kinds of knowledge, however, only become academic when it is gained and structured in a certain way – the western scientific way – a way that has dominated our knowledge system for so many years already. The strict rules and inflexible frameworks of academic tradition can oppose artists. For example, one often should have sufficient publications in A-level journals before one can apply for research funding, whereas the scientific journal ranking hardly contains journals on artistic research. Prestigious exhibitions or other artistic realizations are usually not validated at all. This lack of funding opportunities illustrates how on a more fundamental level, the academic world is not ready yet to include artists. If we wish to comprehend the relationship between art and science, a broader base of knowledge is required (Masini, 1996-21). In the meantime, artistic researchers are handicapped by the claims to deliver academic writing while reliable epistemologies that connect such writing with their art are absent (Schwab & Borgdorff, 2014-11).

In my own practice, I often experience how it is indeed the academic writing that keeps me away from the artistic. Although I like writing as a method to share and express reflections, I often experience the traditions and restrictions of academic writing as a burden. For example, the continuous need to deliver academic evidence and references often brings a halt to my flow, while continuation of flow is one of the essentials to stay inspired. As an artist, I need more freedom of expression and possibilities to step across the conventional, in order to share my knowledge. Because above all, the intuitive, sensitive aspects of artistic knowledge are often too specific, too personal, too intertwined, too dreamy, too

spontaneous, or simply too indescribable to put into words. I therefore value Schwab & Borgdorff's, saying that art is on the one hand "self-determined and suffers when it is told what to do", while it on the other hand "challenges existing forms of practice" (2014:13). Also artistic research, when embedded in academia, challenges existing traditions. Adaptations towards artists are usually slow, and in response it is often the artist who is asked to adapt. While conducting my research, I sometimes encounter misunderstanding and even mistrust, comparable to the general approach towards wolves. In order to be accepted, I occasionally feel a tendency to mimic outward appearance. So although we are invited, like protected wolves in reintroduction programs, we are not always welcome. And once we are there, we are (at least in my case) often asked to behave just like the academics. That brings me to the question whether artists conducting academic research should conform to western scientific traditions, or not. Should we hide our true nature and pretend to be something else? Should a wolf wear sheep's clothing?

First mentioned in the bible by Matthias and later narrated in various parables, the idiom of a wolf wearing sheep's clothing again portrays wolves as wild monsters threatening the domesticated. In the bible, the idiom warns in only one phrase for false prophets and recommends genuine behavior. In some fable versions, the earliest known from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the disguised wolf is fenced by the fooled shepherd and killed for supper (f.e. Basilakis, see: Walz, 1832-427). In other versions, from the 15<sup>th</sup> century or later, the shepherd notices the disguise and hangs the unfortunate wolf in a tree as a warning for other shepherds (f.e. Abstemius). If I would write my own version to illustrate the dilemma of artists in academia, it would go as follows:

*"There once was a lone wolf who wanted to remain in the domestic fields of Academia. After observing customs and regulations, she understood that she needed to adapt to certain standards in order to fit in. She also noticed that although her wildness was attractive to some, it was a threat to others. Therefore she considered getting dressed in sheep's clothing and behave just like the rest, but she was very much in doubt. Because if she did, she would deny her true nature. But if she didn't, she would not be allowed to stay."*

It is up to each individual artist to decide for her- or himself how to deal with this dilemma. In my case I have tried to adapt as much as possible, but believe that more adaptation is not always better. Therefore, I want to plead with artists conducting research not to lose their wolf-like features in order to fit in. Our differences make the exchange and interdisciplinarity between art and science meaningful. If we conform too strongly to academic traditions, we even risk becoming the underdog. So if I would finish my version of the sheep's clothes fable, it would end like this:

*"The she-wolf solved this dilemma by trying out some wool. Wool can be comfortable, she discovered, but sometimes also itchy. If it was curling back her wolfy hair, she needed to wear it at different places. And if she was not wearing too much, she – and others – could still recognize her wolviness. Without pretending to be someone else, she was accepted easier. For some it*

*took more time, but in the end they all learned to appreciate her true fur as well. So in the end, happily ever after, she could decide for herself how much wool to wear."*

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